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# Sheeraza

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Academy of Art,Culture & Languages

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# EDITORIAL

Treating art as an expression of human consciousness has proved a myth as questions have been raised about the very possibility of the expression of human consciousness. This assumption became the basis for a whole new literary trend which was termed as absurdism or the literature of silence. It was also categorized as the anti-literature

wherein art was no longer understood as the consciousness expressing and, therefore, implicitly affirming itself. This phenomenon rendered art into an activity through which the artist exorcises himself of himself and eventually of his art. If earlier the artist's achievement was fulfillment in his art, now his success was to reach a point where he is more satisfied with being silent than by finding a voice.

Silence, therefore, has turned out to be the farthest possibility of communication. The writer continues to speak but in a manner that his audience can't hear. That is why most of the art in our time has been experienced by audience as a move into silence or unintelligibility.

Besides the contemporary determinants, there has been a universal discontent with language whenever thought seems to have reached the level of excruciating complexity. This is where art borders spiritualism because spiritual realm also talks through the medium of silence.

Such factors led many writers in the twentieth century to call for a revision of the language. Their work was moved by this quest for a consciousness shorn of the contamination of language and of the distortions produced by conceiving the world exclusively in verbal

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terms. Discovering that one has nothing to say, one seeks a way to say that.

The aesthetic imperative underlying this artistic tendency can be put in this way – "Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said at all can be said clearly. But not everything that can be thought can be said."

Language devolution has been very far-reaching in terms of its consequences. The classical sense of at-homeness with language is gone now. Although the human-language affair is not going to conclude soon, but the semantic reconciliation between the two has become chequered with deep ruptures which seem difficult to darn. Contrarily, alternative modes of making communion with the internal and external realities are being exacted out.

No doubt, the exhaustion of language seems to be the latest metaphor for the universal human condition, but it may equally prove as culturally a relative phenomenon. While in the Occident, language atlas has drastically changed, in the Orient, rhythm of word is still, by and large, intact. In fact, new possibilities within the language itself are being explored.

There are many questions which arise in the context of the clash between language and silence. Is the death of language the death of the mind? Is human identity a speech act only? What would be the world like without words? Is human being only a language animal? These are some of the critical issues that ask for serious study in the backdrop of the loss of the word.

(Dr) Abid Ahmad

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# KASHMIRI MYSTIC POETRY AND SYNCRETIC TRADITION

**Prof Neerja Mattoo**

Syncretic creativity is the outcome of a reciprocal process of symbiosis where influences from one another are willingly absorbed because they strike a chord somewhere in minds and hearts, and set up resonances with far reaching consequences. Instead of being hemmed in by one particular religious or cultural parameter, creative people reach out and intermingle, enriching their experiences. The points of reference and allusions, mythological or historical, do not stay exclusive to particular communities, but overarch their creativity, with the assumption that they will be understood by the readers or listeners. Creativity is a celebration of diversity, an inclusiveness that enriches a river with waters from a hundred streams flowing into it. Thus we hear songs composed by Muslim poets sung at Sufiana Mehfils by Muslim singers, invoking Shiva or the Devi. While Baba Allauddin Khan composes a song of prayer to Sharada, the Afghan governor of Kashmir Ali Mardan Khan writes a Shiva Stuti and our Kashmiri mystic poet Ahmad Batwari refers to Hindu gods and mythology as well as the Sufi Mansur in this poem:-

*Yandrazuni durbar Naghma karan chhuy Paristano,*
*Soz-i-Mansur grazaan, kan me ditsov, gos dewaano.*
(The fairyland performs with song and dance in the court of Indra,
As I listened, entranced, quite maddened I was).

Kashmiri mystic poetry is replete with such syncretism. How

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did it happen? To understand this phenomenon, one has to glance at one particular period of Kashmiri history. From the eleventh century onwards, with the decline of centuries of Hindu rule, Islam was beginning to make forays into Kashmir in various forms, aggressively as well as unobtrusively. It tried to come as an invading force, first under the command of Mahmud of Ghazni at his expeditions to India in 1015 AD and again in 1021 AD, but failed to establish itself, because Mahmud faced stiff opposition from the local Hindu king and had to beat a retreat. As for the unobtrusive way, it made a gentler entry as a new philosophy brought in by the Sufis and other learned Muslim scholars from Iran and Central Asia where Islam had swept aside other older religions and become the common faith. With the rise of Turkish militarism and its imperialistic expansion, however, the Sufi way of life with its pacifist message and belief in the brotherhood of all human beings came into conflict with the powerful establishment which had developed an interest in hierarchies and exclusivenesses to perpetuate itself. The radical message of Sufism, consequently, was under threat. The orthodoxy branded the Sufis as heretics, particularly after the renowned Sufi Mansur-al-Hallaj had deeply offended the Muslim clergy by pronouncing the words, 'Ana'l-Haqq' (I am God). His words had merely expressed the Sufi belief in the immanent presence of God in everything, including a human being, but to the uninitiated it was blasphemy, punishable by nothing short of death. Finally, the tyrannical rule of the Mongols, who, under the conqueror Timur had spread their empire to

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Iran, also drove many Sufis away from their original home to this valley with which there had been earlier contacts, as Kashmir stood at the crossroads of various cultural and commercial influences and transactions. While travelling and interacting with the people of central Asia, Mahayana Buddhism and its austere asceticism and meditative practices had already influenced the Islamic faith of the Sufis. In Kashmir, the people were still Hindu, but theirs had been a branch which is now known as Kashmir Saivism. In it too we find the influence of Buddhism, to a limited degree, in its having broken free both from Brahmanical strictures and idol worship, and its belief that union with God was possible for anyone who would wish to find it, no matter what his or her caste or religious fold. To the Sufis, therefore, Kashmir would seem to be familiar territory. But with political instability and resultant decay of the economic, cultural and social fabric, the religious practices of the common populace of Kashmir had also lost their original meaning. The people had forgotten the essence of Saivism and in the absence of worthy commentators or teachers, their religion had degenerated into mere *Tantric* ritual. From the sophistication of real *Saiva Darshan* it had fallen into what is derogatively known as *Vamachar* (secret, occult practices).

A brief note on the essential features of Kashmir Saivism, a tradition that goes back to ancient times, but is historically documented from the 8th century A.D. onwards, is necessary here in order to locate the source of Kashmiri mysticism.

According to the Saivites of Kashmir, it is the sage Durvasa

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who first revealed the original mantras in his *Siva Sutras*, explaining the philosophy and practices of their belief. In a story reminiscent that of the revelation of the Ten Commandments to Moses, it is believed that Shiva himself revealed them to Durvasa by drawing him to a rock at the foot of the Mahadev range in Srinagar, on which they were inscribed. These original sources are known among the believers as *Agamas*, (something arrived on its own), which suggests their divine origin. The rock known as S*hankar Pal* (The rock of Shankar, another name of Shiva) can still be seen, but there are, alas, no words of wisdom to be seen on it today, it is smooth as a slate wiped clean!

The Sutras were later further explained and elaborated upon by a succession of scholars known as *Saiva Acharyas* (teachers), prominent among whom were Vasugupta, Bhatta Kallata, Somanand, Utpaldev and Abhinavagupta. Their commentaries and scholarly exposition of the subtle forms and content of Saivism, based on logic as well as intuitive comprehension, from the ninth to the early eleventh centuries, led to the evolution of a uniquely Kashmiri mystic philosophy *Trika Sastra*, or what is now known as Kashmir Saivism. The world, in its view, is not an illusion, but real, born out of the playfully creative vibrations (*Spanda*) emanating from Siva, the Supreme Being. (The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word 'Siva', is 'auspicious' or 'benevolent') This divine creation, therefore, has to be appreciated by the senses, comprehended by the faculties and apprehended intuitively, without becoming too attached to it. Siva is in it as well as outside it

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and the highest goal of human life is to see itself at once as part of this divine play, as well as outside it. *Trika* is the method by which one can achieve it, because it is concerned with creating a harmonious relationship among three things on the one hand: man, energy and God. On the other hand it then suggests three ways again to achieve it: *Anavopaya, Shaktopaya and Shambhovopaya* . Roughly translated, the first means using external aids like logic and other kind of sense perceptions to lift the veil that hides the Supreme Being, even though He is ensconced within every living thing. The second way means withdrawal within one's own being, meditating, in order to see Him. The third way means God's grace, which enables one to see Him without any effort at all, i.e., *being*, instead of *becoming*, which happens very rarely.

Now let us take a look at the Sufi philosophy. In order to explain the basic belief of the Sufis, the following quote is useful:-

"Verily we are for God and verily unto Him we return".

The Sufis liken Infinity to an ocean and the Sufi's vocation is to discipline himself to plunge into—rather drown in it, so that he is drawn back into the source from which he has come in the beginning. Love for God and for all His creations, including themselves, therefore, is for them the most direct path to God, which is the goal. Their creed implies total dedication. On the one hand they believe in love, but on the other, there is a constant need to wage war against the soul, which refuses to submit to the intense discipline required to follow the path. This may seem a paradox, but it is not so to

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the Sufi. The way of love presupposes the presence of its opposite and hence the constant battle to overcome it. This co-existence, as it were, with and without the world is what brings the Saiva Yogi and the Sufi closest to each other.

The faceoff between the Sufis and the locals, used by yogis, must, therefore, have been rewarding to both. With their exemplary behavior, sincerity and firmness of faith, believing and practicing a doctrine of equality of all human beings, the message of the new arrivals must have gone home. The Kashmiris were now face to face with a new choice of beliefs. There was much that was similar between this and their old faith, though outwardly they seemed to be in conflict, having sprung from soils so very far away from one another. A spiritual orientation with an earnest desire to know and become a part of the Ultimate Reality and a readiness to undergo penance in this aim, were some of the common attributes of Saivism as practised in Kashmir and Sufi Islam. Thus a kind of fusion of faiths took place and it is from this very fusion that the Rishi order of Kashmir was born. Sheikh Nuruddin, whom the Kashmiris call Nund Rishi, in the beginning of the fifteenth century, founded this spiritual brotherhood. Apart from the spiritual, moral and ethical influence it had on the people, this peculiarly Kashmiri order of Rishis enriched the stream of mystic poetry in Kashmiri, which continues to flow uninterrupted to this day, from Nund Rishi through Shamas Faqir (1843-1901) and others down to Bimla Raina (born 1947).

Lalded appeared on the scene at a very interesting juncture in

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the history of ideas in Kashmir and her life and work had a lot to do with the fusion that has given a distinct identity to the Kashmiris' religious practices, whether Hindu or Muslim. Hence the desire of both the communities to claim her as their very own.

Now let me show how syncretism became a way of life for Kashmiri poets right from Lal Ded in the 14th century. Here is a well-known vaakh of hers, which is an excellent example of her using a syncretic idiom:-

*Shiva chhuy thali thali rav zaan*
*Mo zaan Heund ta Musalmaan*
*Trukay chhuk ta panun paan praznaav*
*Soy chhay Sahebas suti zaanizaan*
Shiva is everywhere, know Him as the sun
Know not the Hindu different to the Muslim
If truly wise (Trikait) know your own self
That alone is the way to know the Saheb.

Apart from the idea of breaking down barriers by invoking the image of the sun shining upon everyone without distinction and going on to emphasize the ideal of Re-cognition, notice how seamlessly Lal Ded hangs the Islamist valance of 'Saheb' to the apparent reference to Shiva. The verse enacts in its own syncretic idiom the religious, mystic and linguistic synthesis it advocates.

Now see the Nund Rishi *shruk*:-

*Akis maalis maji hundyan*
*Timan duy traavith ta kyaye*
*Musalmaanan kyaav Hendyan*
*Kar bandan tosh Khoday*
Born of the same parents,

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Who can create division between the two?
Whether Muslim or Hindu,
Bind the two and God you will please.

Here is his another shruk where we also see the syncretic diction at work and a picture of a society where reference points and idiom were inclusive:-

*Aravalan naagrad rovukh,*
*Saada rovukh tsooran manz*
*Mudagaran gwor panditha rovukh,*
*Raazahaenz rovukh kaavan manz*
A fountain you were, but lost in rocks,
A saint you were, but lost among thieves,
A wise teacher you were, but lost in the ignorant,
A swan you were, but lost among crows!

Aziz Darvesh echoes the same sentiments in the 19th century:-

*Ath kadalas karu zolaano*
*Ami apor chhuy 'fana filah'*
*Na chhu Hyund tay na Musalmano*
*Bozu jano suy soz jaan*
Tie yourself with chains to this bridge
Across it you'll find annihilation in the divine
Where there is no Hindu nor Muslim
Listen to that song so sweet, Oh do!

I quote Shah Ghafoor's verses to show how an inclusive vocabulary transcends religious beliefs:-

*Brahma, Veshnu, Maheshwar gaarun*
*Shaf chhuy tahunday zuv*
*Paan hay khatnay jaan hekh marun*
*Dharnay dharun sohamsu*
Search for Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar,
The life that flows through you is their boon,
Should you lose them, it is death indeed,
Meditate with faith on Suhamsu.

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Rupa Bhavani (1625—1721) is another major voice in this tradition, but unfortunately, rather under-rated because of the obscurity of her vaakhs. It seems that during the intervening centuries between Lal Ded and her, Kashmir had witnessed sweeping historical and cultural changes and consequently become a linguistic melting-pot, absorbing words from the north, including Iran and Central Asia as well as from the south. Her Kashmiri Pandit family had left Kashmir and settled down in the Deccan fearing religious persecution in the late 15th century and had returned to Kashmir only a couple of generations before her birth. In her mystic poetry, therefore, the influence of Sanskrit, the language of religion and intellectual discourse among Brahmins, is much more visible. It seems that she did not share Lal Ded's mission to make the esoteric accessible to the common men and women—she addresses the initiated, to whom her diction and ellipses would have been comprehensible. She, however, establishes a direct link with Lal Ded in this verse:-

*Om gwar antar that nirmalam*
*Shuddham atyant vidyadharam*
*Lal naam Lal Parmam gwaram*
*Shiva Madhav naaham param Brahma sohum.*

Having established the name of the Guru, flawless,
Pure, all-knowing, in my inner self,
Lal is the name, Lal my supreme guru,
Neither Shiva nor Madhav, myself the Supreme Self am I

In spite of her sanskritized vocabulary, the non-duality of human beings is established by her in this verse:-

*Saarith gata travith gwashas tsayas*
*Maarith saary yim chani paanths yendri*

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*Tavay sahazkali yug saadith*
*Sarvavadi zaanim gyaan paanas hyuvai*
Feeling my way through darkness, transcending
The senses five You gave me, I entered the abode of Light,
Practicing the yoga of Sahajkal, I realized,
All seekers were like me, on the same path to the same goal.

Love for music is evident in Kashmiri mystic poetry and this too links our poets irrespective of their faith. Khwaja Habib puts it very clearly here:-

*Saaz santoor dahraaye*
*Dar shariat no chhuye*
*Aashikas tee bas chhuye*
*Yara gathsavo divye*
The instruments saaz, santoor and dehar,
Though not part of the shariat
For the lover they are the only things that matter,
Friend, let's go where the celebrations are!

And Rupa Bhawani too cannot do without music. In fact her choice of instruments is in itself an exercise in syncretism!:-

*Var diyi tab u neray vasa*
*Bhumi pad game rasa rasa*
*Khasan ta shabd shunum aahang*
*Saarang rag veena ta chyang.*
If He should grant the boon, I shall go forth
Step by step, rung by rung I rise,
The Word I hear, accompanied
By the music of sarang, veena and chyang.

Finally the diversity of mystic experience itself is fused in these poets—they talk of a similar process.

Here is Lal Ded:-

*Deev vatta divar vatta*

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*Petha bon chhuy ikavaath*
*Pooz kas karakh hutta Batta*
*Kar manas tu pavanas sangaath*
Your idol is stone, the temple a stone too-
All a stone bound together from top to toe!
What is it you worship, you dense Brahmin?
True worship must bind the vital air of the heart to the mind.

In another vaakh she describes her experience clearly:-

*Damadam kormas damanhaale*
*Prazalyom deph ta naneyam zaath.*
*Andaryum prakash nebar thsotum*
*Gati manza rotum ta karmas thaph.*
The bellows pipe I pressed gently, muffling its breath,
The lamp lit, in its radiance I stood revealed.
I let the inner light burst out in the open,
Through the darkness caught hold of Him and would not let go.

Lal Ded's metaphors are not obscure, they come from ordinary life. Here she uses one from the blacksmith's forge to explain a subtle concept of Trikashastra. She is talking about the intensely disciplined practice of breath control as part of *samadhi* (yogic meditation).

Here is Shams Faqir's verse that is uncannily similar in experience:-

*Praan Zolnam pavanuki naaran*
*Shashkali hund naar me chhuye*
*Samah kornam ami omkaran*
My soul set aflame by the fire of vital airs
The radiance of the mystical moon envelopes me,
Om has put me in tune, lost me to the world.

And here is Khwaja Habib in the same frame of mind and spirit :-

*Arifav ta aashikav rachay van*
*Mani buz Mansuri naara dazas tan*

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*Analhaq por tani manz marakan*
Love's devotees sought refuge in the forests
The Word revealed to Mansur, his body ablaze
'I am the Truth' he dared to shout to the populace around.

Here is a vaakh of Rupa Bhawani, which sounds almost totally Sufi and uses a mixture of linguistic influences:-

*Deeh anand nad may*
*Lutsan pyala mutsar*
*Saqiya pilao HU HA*
*Bu, Buha ha ha matwala.*
The body in bliss—a river of wine
Lay open the cups of eyes
Oh Saqi, get me drunk on Hu and Ha
Transported, I laugh in ecstasy!

I would like to conclude with the juxtaposition of a Lal Ded's vaakh and Shah Ghafoor's verse:-

*Gwaras prithsyam saasi latte*
*Yath na kenh vanaan tas kya naav*
*Prithsaan prithsaan thuchis ta loosus*
*Kenh nasa kyathaam draav.*
A thousand times I asked the Guru,
Pray how name Him who has no name?
I asked in vain, exhausted and sunk,
Till out of nothing something emerged.

And now Shah Ghafoor:-

*Kenh nay os kyathani os*
*Kenhnas manz chhu kenthsa*
*Kenhnas mane zaanan gos*
*Panay os bu bahanay.*
When there was nothing, something was,

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Some meaning there is in that something,
The meaning dawned on me slowly-
He was everything, I a mere excuse.

(The author is a celebrated writer, translator and academic, based in Srinagar.)

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# HOW FREDERIC DREW UNDERSTOOD GUJJARS

**Dr Javaid Rahi**

Frederic Drew (1836-1891), an English geologist, studied Jammu and Kashmir over 150 years ago and published a book titled *Jummoo and Kashmir Territories: A Geographical Account* in 1875. In this book, he offered opinions practically on all races and castes that inhabited the geographical limits of J&K at the time including Kashmiris, Dogras, Gujjars, Bhadarwahis, Rajputs, Gaddis,. Botos and others. He expressed his opinions and insights on a variety of subjects on Gujjars as well, thereby making the book useful for learning about the Gujjar population of Jammu and Kashmir. The book was published by Edward Stanford, 55, Charing, South West in the year 1875 from London. In this book, he discussed the Gujjar people he had encountered in a variety of settings. Even after almost one and a half-century, Federic's observations are still very much relevant. Some of the observations made by him in his book are reproduced below:

**Gujjars, the identity-conscious people.**

Frederic made the observation that Gujjars are identity-conscious people who do not interact with strangers without a compelling reason to do so. After around 150 years, this is still something that should be considered accurate. Gujjars often do not interact with people of other groups. They reside in isolated places within their communities. In areas with steep terrain, the majority of Gujjar and Bakarwal women are afraid to talk to strangers and would rather cover up their faces with the veil. They always try to make an effort to protect themselves from the openness that characterizes metropolitan life and society. Drew in his book states that a large portion of Gujjars are involved in the production of milk products and

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live near urban areas as well, but yet, in order to keep their culture and heritage alive, they live with their own people. Even today this tradition is still in practice that originates from cultural ideas that place an emphasis on discretion and personal space. In order to preserve this, Gujjars also engage in gender segregation and restrict the amount of interaction between men and women who are not or are less related to one another.

In his book, Frederic writes: "They (Gujjars) are rather surly in disposition, having that kind of independence which consists in liking to be left alone and to have as little to do with other races as possible." However, Drew observed that "when one comes in contact with them, they are not difficult to deal with at all. Even today the Gujjars do not want any other group to share anything with them including their lands, pastures, cultural treats or traditional properties in any way. They always live in their own clusters and maintain an independent identity, which distinguishes them from other communities despite the fact that the majority of them are Muslims.

**Origin and appearance of a Gujjar**

Drew in his book made an assertion that the Gujjars are an Aryan race. He writes "I agree with Sir George Campbell that they (Gujjars) are an Aryan race; however, their countenance cannot be called high Aryan." Drew was referring to the appearance of the people. The Aryan idea which gained a lot of traction in the 19th century postulated that the nomadic people known as the Aryans were the ones who brought Indo-European languages and cultures into existence. The theory of Drew has been subjected to a substantial amount of criticism from contemporary academics and researchers. The Aryan theory itself is one of the most significant areas of

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disagreement despite the fact that it has been thoroughly discredited and rejected by contemporary academic institutions. Studies in genetics and archaeology have indicated that the Aryan migration concept is far more complicated and multifaceted than was initially claimed and that it cannot be traced to the creation of a single Aryan race. This contradicts the original hypothesis.

According to Drew, the Gujjars have a tall and slender frame and they move somewhat slowly most of the time. The lower part of their faces are the same size, but their noses always have a bit of a curve to them, similar to what is commonly seen in Aryan cultures. Their forehead is somewhat thin and they covet the well-defined brow of the more refined races. He went on to say that even though they are an Aryan race, as Sir George Campbell pointed out, the Gujjars do not have a particularly high Aryan countenance.

**Demography of Gujjars**

Drew made an observation regarding the demographics of the Gujjar people. He stated that Gujjars can be found all over the north-western region of India between Delhi and the Indus. In these regions, they with their animals dwell in the hills that are located over the mountain ranges. They are also scattered here and there among the lower hills and in certain valleys that are located among the higher mountains. They might be the only inhabitants of a village at times, or they may share it with other people, but regardless, they always continue to exist as a separate entity. Even though they own some land, they do not depend on it for their living. Since they are a nomadic pastoral community that searches for pastures for their herds in various places at varying levels, they survive primarily off the produce of their cattle.

**Tribal migration of Gujjars**

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When discussing the way of life and means of subsistence, Frederic Drew wrote, "Though holding some land, they (Gujjars) do not chiefly depend on it for sustenance for they are a migrating, pastoral tribe, who seek for their herds pastures in various parts at different levels, and live mostly by the produce of their cattle." Although the Gujjars do own some land, they do not primarily depend on it for their survival.

He went on to say, "Everywhere I have met the Gujjars, I have found them to be possessors of herds of buffaloes, and to drive these, as the spring and summer advanced, into the higher mountain pastures".

**No Life in Gulmarg**

Gujjars used to call Gulmarg their *Dhok* – the grazing pasture in the past which is now the most popular tourist site. Drew in his book stated that there is no one living there. He said the only people that live there during the summer are Kashmiri Gujjars because the area is not constantly inhabited. Traditionally, the Gujjar people have been nomadic herders. During the summer months, they move their cattle to higher altitudes in search of greener pastures for their animals. The Kashmiri Gujjars move their herds to Gulmarg during the summer months since the area has an abundance of grassland for them to graze on.

**With respect to the Panjal Pastures**

In his book, about the lower Himalayas and the Panjal range, Drew stated that there is no human habitation on these hilly ranges. He also stated that during summer, people, particularly the Gujjars, take their flocks and herds high up on the mountains from both sides of the Panjal, which is left unfrequented. This is because the Panjal range is considered to be a wilderness area. This text provides additional evidence

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that the word "Pir," which is currently appended to the word "Panjal" (Pir Panjal), was not in use prior to the year 1875.

**The Term Bakerwal**

The term "Bakerwal" did not come into usage until 1875. Drew who met with Gujjar shepherds observed that Gujjars herd their sheep to higher elevations during the summer. Drew also mentioned the language of Gujjars in his book and stated that they speak a different language with certain unique terms, some of which are similar to words used in Panjabi, Dogri and Pahari as well.

(The author is a tribal researcher working on Gujjar-Bakarwal and other pastoral groups.)

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# CLASSIC IN KASHMIRI

## READING PLATO IN TRANSLATION

**Dr M Maroof Shah**

Who has not read or heard of Plato? In Kashmir everyone knows something of Plato as an ideal, an embodiment of wisdom or final reference point to settle intellectual issues. We often hear a retort *chi kyah aflatoon chukha*? (Are you Plato?). if one finds the addressee floundering or parading wisdom. It is a subtle invitation to keep conversation open and stay humble. Many statements and legends about Socrates and Plato have been assimilated in Kashmiri folklore and proverbs. One can easily see Kashmiri mystic poets restating what may loosely be called Platonism (which in turn echoes key formulations of the culture shaped by Vedanta/Kashmir Saivism/Sufism) for the masses. The idea of *hikmah* has been central to the notion of Rishi who personifies both intellectual and spiritual ideal in Kashmir. The Master is a sage who recalls Socrates or Plato and who is not interested in meeting or following a Master in Kashmir? *Gech Sahibes hawale* (Go under the patronage of the Master) is what is often heard as a parting message between parents and children or friends and relatives in Kashmir. Prof M H Zaffar's commentary on Siva Sutra and other Saivite classics demonstrates the convergence and continuity between sagely (Platonic/Rishi) and mystic poles of Kashmiri culture.

Zaffar has been a lifelong student of Eastern, especially Kashmiri sages. Plato has been his love from the beginning as he resonates deeply with the sagely/Rishic ambiance of the culture he has inherited and grown up in. It is a daunting task to translate Plato due to several misreadings of him in academia. Zafar has not courted controversies and has simply

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sought to translate from available translations in English. He has eschewed translating dialogues that have been at the centre of controversy amongst Plato scholars. He has already translated certain key texts of Kashmiri Saivite tradition and has also worked on Sartre for his doctoral thesis. Zafar, himself a poet and scholar of aesthetics, has taken ample care to communicate nuances in Kashmiri idiom of a master stylist Plato. Zafar's text is an effortless reading that could even be adopted by mass media in the form of serials. Plato *is* education and as such our educationists may well capitalize on this work for the benefit of masses.

It has been a singular misfortune of modern Kashmiris that they have been nurtured on philosophy deficient diet contributing to manifold ills besides criminal betrayal of our cultural heritage. Prof M H Zaffar is one of the very few scholar-translators of philosophical texts of both Eastern and Western origin into Kashmiri. He has been one of the most passionate activists of philosophy literacy in Kashmir. Major modern figures in philosophy have been virtually unknown for Urdu and Kashmiri speaking people in our part of the country as no institution/scholar had dared to translate even secondary or introductory texts.

Kashmir has one of the most-well developed and lesser-known mystic-philosophical traditions. It can broadly be appreciated in Platonist framework, if we recognize the thesis of essential similarity/convergence between Vedantic-Saivite and Platonist traditions. We have Bulleh Shahs, Bohmes and Farids but unknown and unsung. We have not only great mystic poets but also great mystic thinkers from Abhinavgupta to Yaqub Sarfi. We also have Nagarjuna, the greatest mystic-logician and theoretician of the Eastern world, not necessarily geographically linked to Kashmir as

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Mahayana was. Besides contributing to development of Sarvastavadin school of Buddhism, Kashmir Saivism, aesthetics and literacy criticism, Kashmir has been a jnan or sharda-centric culture where darsanas embodying unique interface and convergence of religious, philosophical, artistic and spiritual dimensions have flowered. A few comments on Platonic streak in Kashmiri culture and thought need to be noted.

Kashmiris are generally skeptical of logic chopping, book learning and what falls under rationalistic domain. All our traditions from Buddhist, Saivite to Sufi are 'Unitarian' – monistic is not the right term and pantheistic is simply wrong. Thus, we have no difficulty in stating the central tenets of Kashmir philosophy in terms of perennial philosophy. Who can separate Lalla who came from Saivite background and Alamdar, a Muslim who married indigenous Rishiyyet with Islam? What fundamental difference is there between Abhinavagupata and Ibn Arabi on the question of 'First Principle' and its relation to the world of manifestation and man that has respectively impacted the development of Saivite and Sufi tradition in Kashmir? The salvific paradigm of Mahyana Buddhism and Sufism can hardly be distinguished. Isn't it a questionable endeavor to distinguish between Parmanand and Rahim Saeb's poetry in terms of metaphysical and moral import?

Buddhism was assimilated by Hinduism/Saivism though it continued to live and impact in its own way on the latter. Similarly, Saivism was assimilated by Reshiyyat after Almadar. Even the greatest Muslim master or teacher is remembered by Buddhist-Hindu or Saivist from epithets like Shajanand and Jagat Guru (World Teacher). Very few Muslims note that for Sufi teachers the epithet Sheikh al-

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Alam has been very occasionally used for Sufis.

Zafar has attempted to trace shared language and horizon of different philosophical and religious traditions that have flourished in Kashmir. His interest in Plato may be understood as search for conceptual resources to engage in rational terms with diverse mytho-poetic and religio-philosophical universes of meaning in Kashmir.

Other than scriptures and writings of great saints Plato should also be read by anyone who can read. (Some Sufis and Muslim thinkers consider Socrates whom Plato seeks to give voice as a Prophet or sage of Greeks or at least a divine or realized soul). In fact one of the best uses of education is opportunity to read Plato. Those who can't read should hear it being read. And for the first time Prof. Iqbal Nazki has provided the opportunity. Zafar's work, complementing Iqbal Nazki's earlier work brings Plato to Kashmir, giving him sophisticated contemporary Kashmiri dialect. He comments through him, on the meaning of virtue, justice and death. One wonders if it is not contemporary Kashmir in every domain in which Plato gives his version of the ideal State.

Translating Plato was long overdue. We can, as a community, only be obliged to likes of Zafar and Nazki for taking up this daunting task. Though they aren't quite professional Plato scholars and as such have relied on English translations and one misses scholarly footnotes and glossary, yet our collective guilt for not translating Plato has been overcome.

Certain key insights articulated in Plato corpus – Plato and Plato's Socrates – constitute perennial heritage of mankind. Some of them may be summed up in the words of Kraut: "Human well-being does not consist in wealth, power, or fame, but in virtue; that so long as one remains a good person, one is immune to misfortune; that to possess the virtues is to

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have intellectual mastery over a distinct subject matter- that this mastery can be acquired only by means of a successful investigation of what the virtues are; and that if one leaves these questions unexamined, one's life is not worth living." "Ordinary human beings, untouched by philosophical education, are likened to prisoners in a cave who are forced to gaze on shadows created by artificial light and cast by artifacts paraded by unseen manipulators. Their conception of what exists and of what is worth having is so severely limited and the deception by which they are victimized is so systematic that they cannot even recognize that they are confined, and would not immediately regard an interruption in their routine ways of thought as liberation." His insistence that Heaven can't be bribed and there is a providence that shapes our ends and no man is willfully bad constitutes standing testimonies to the rights of the Spirit or sacred core in the constitution of things and man.

Plato is a mirror into which we lesser mortals are required to see their images and ask ourselves with his Socrates whether we have dispassionately examined our lives or views. Reading Plato in Kashmiri translation is a rare treat for Kashmiris who find in it lost address of their own sages and archetypal embodiment of wisdom.

Given how complex, influential and hotly debated the legacy of Plato has been, a few comments are due to appreciate the task Prof Zafar has undertaken.

Plato needs no introduction and if one feels the need for that it only shows the perception of a grave crisis on modern education. Plato is the Teacher of the world, according to the greatest philosophers, Sufis and educationists of the world. The greatest Sufi metaphysician called him divine Plato and another great authority reported about his great status in the

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otherworld. If it has taken such a brilliant philosopher-mystic as Simone Weil five years to learn how to approach Plato and avoid common misreadings that have become so influential today, it calls for extreme caution and humility to approach Plato. Plato-bashing is so common and all kinds of errors are attributed to him in an age singularly known for tolerating ugliness and hatred of wisdom, religion, mysteries and death and ousting in practice the science of virtues from business and many other spheres of life, a few points as reminders of Plato as traditionally understood or received by Judeo-Christian-Islamic cultures and the greatest Platonists to clarify certain popular perceptions hindering appreciation of Plato legacy that in turn would better facilitate our understanding of traditional world and the problems precipitated by turn against Plato in modernity.

Why Philosophy and why Plato?

Why philosophy concerns everyone and Plato is to be heard by all and may be understood by noting a few points. First few points from Taylor, arguably the greatest Platonist of last century reading whom is an antidote to poisonous propaganda against Plato in Plato scholarship.

The end of all the writings of Plato is the end of all true philosophy or wisdom, the perfection and the happiness of man. Man therefore, is the general subject; and the first business of philosophy must be to inquire what is that being called man? Who is to be made happy? What is his nature of happiness?

Philosophy," says Heracles "is the purification and perfection of human life. It is the purification, indeed, from material irrationality and the mortal body; but the perfection, in consequence of being the resumption of our proper felicity, and a renascent to the divine likeness. To affect these two is the province of Virtue and Truth; the former exterminating the

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immoderation of the passions; and the latter introducing the divine form to those who are naturally adapted to its reception.

Philosophy thus defined, which may be compared to a luminous pyramid, terminating in Deity, and having for its basis the rational soul of man and its spontaneous unperverted conceptions,—of this philosophy, august, magnificent, and divine, Plato may be justly called the primary leader and hierophant, through whom, like the mystic light in the inmost recesses of some sacred temple, it first shone forth with occult and venerable splendour. It may indeed be truly said of the whole of this philosophy, that it is the greatest good which man can participate: for if it purifies us from the defilements of the passions and assimilates us to Divinity, it confers on us the proper felicity of our nature. Hence it is easy to collect its pre-eminence to all other philosophies; to show that where they oppose it, they are erroneous; that so far as they contain anything scientific they are allied to it; and
that at best they are but rivulets derived from this vast ocean of truth.

Taylor has attempted to show in his work that the philosophy of Plato "possesses this pre-eminence; that its dignity and sublimity are unrivalled; that it is the parent of all that ennobles man; and, that it is founded on principles, which neither time can obliterate, nor sophistry subvert." And showing this constitutes the principal design of his General Introduction to the Philosophy and Writings of Plato.

Accustomed to modern notions regarding philosophy as conceptual or linguistic analysis or problem solving enterprise or that raises questions and synthesizes knowledge of other domains it looks extremely anachronistic to assert with Socrates that philosophy's task is preparation for death. I wish to understand this claim in its proper setting in ancient traditional cultures to make sense of Socratic claim and

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ground his arguments in cross-disciplinary fashion.

Philosophy for ancients and Plato is not a mere theoretical rational inquiry but a realization, intellection or noetic vision that transcends subject-object duality and demands something like ethical discipline. For traditionalist sages and other advocates of traditional philosophy (that encompasses Indian, Chinese, Far Eastern, Islamic, Judeo-Christian and wisdom traditions) philosophy in the primordial sense of the term prepares one for death and assimilation to God as Plato said and is not a rational logical abstract discipline only and is allied to gnosis, a way of life or realization of the good. It involves not just *ratio* or mental faculty of reason but *nous*, the supraindividual universal faculty of intellect as well and the later makes all the difference. Philosophy, Algis Uzdavinys notes in his introduction to *The Golden Chain: An Anthology of Pythagorean and Platonic Philosophy*, in the traditional Orphic-Pythagorean sense is wisdom and love combined in a moral and intellectual purification in order to reach the "likeness to God." It involves contemplation of Beauty and Good. In fact all contemplation is a form of death of self/mind. All meditation and contemplation, especially on the void called death, leads to death of the will, the will of the Other or non-self or what may be in theological terms called God is a sort of the death of the willing self. Virtue becomes possible only after this death of the soul, the soul as conative faculty. The Greek word *nous* covers both spirit and intellect (*intellectus, aql*) of Medieval Christian and Islamic lexicon. Platonic philosophy should be understood as a spiritual and contemplative way of life leading to illumination or enlightenment; an intellectual discipline based on intellection culminating in union (*henosis*) with 'ideal forms.' This concurs both with "Orphic"-Indian conception of philosopher

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as one who seeks release from the wheel of cyclical term as with the view of perennialists who represent all traditional philosophies against modern rationalistic one. It is one of the key blunders of modern discipline called philosophy. According to traditionalist critics, it has been largely forgetful of the Pythagorean-Platonic notion of philosophy as a pathway of communion with God. Indeed post-Aristotelian philosophy in general and modern philosophy in particular has been forgetful of the notion of what Heidegger calls thinking and Plato would perhaps call attention to death, pure receptivity to Being that reveals itself not to conceptual intellect but to intellection. Plato would mourn absence of key preoccupations of ancients in the mansions of modern philosophy and warn against occupation with trivialities, not unlike Heidegger who finds the most important questions being relegated to background or oblivion in his contemporaries. Receptivity to Being achieved by *fana* in Sufism or consent to become nothing after transcending egocentric view in other traditions including Indian ones, is what is preparation for death. This alone gives the view of the world as full of wonder and beauty. Traditional aesthetics assumes that the joy of art arises from transcendence of ego by contemplating art forms. Modern philosophy has vetoed mystery and wonder and thus lost that great virtue of being humble and receptive towards unrepresentable truth in phenomena. Plato's insistence on preparation for death is not invitation for speculating on our posthumous states but across traditions, achieving death in life so that one achieves primal innocence that Adam lost after the fall. It involves seeing objects as separate from subject or what amounts to the same thing as seeing things egoistically, dualistically or outside God. Sufis are supposed to die every moment so that they

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fully enjoy freshness of revelations of Being. God consciousness is identified in different traditions (especially in Zen and Sufism) with present moment or Eternal Now, achieved by dying to both past memories and future anxieties. Simone Weil's definition of God as "attention without distraction" perhaps echoes Plato whom she so deeply loved and converges with this notion of philosophy as cleansing and sharpening of perception. Philosophy in traditional sense gives us eyes to see, to perceive without distraction or colouring from egocentric desires and passions and ultimately to dissolve into objects so that only seeing is there without a seer and that dissolves all epistemological problems. We again need philosophy as transformative practice that through rigorous ethical discipline (something absent in modern armchair discipline of philosophy as if it is learning new information or solving logical puzzles) results into a state of supreme clarity of understanding and joy and peace that passeth understanding. Philosophy as a practice of the self, esoteric discipline allied to mysticism and needing proper initiation and not; a profane discipline, logic chopping, linguistic analysis, calculus of abstractions or speculative exercises are what Plato stood for and no wonder we find the notion of preparation of death as anachronistic as we have forgotten what philosophy stood for in ancient times. Tomlin has also observed in his *Philosophers of East and West* that only sage can be a philosopher in oriental civilizations. In modern Western philosophy this is not a required qualification and ideally it is a hindrance. Schuon suggests to reserve the name of philosophers for sages and to describe rationalists as profane thinkers. Philosophy, as Algis Uzdavinys notes, is, according to the best of the Greeks, to express by means of reason certainties "seen" or "lived" by

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the immanent Intellect. I am tempted to quote from perennialists, much ignored critics of modern philosophy but great advocates of Plato and traditional philosophy. Perennialists, bringing in the witness of countless traditional sages throughout the world, regard ancient philosophy as essentially a way of life: not only inseparable from "spiritual exercises," but also in accord with cosmological myths and sacred rites. In the broader traditional sense, philosophy consists not simply of a conceptual edifice (be it of the order of reason or myth); but of a lived concrete existence conducted by initiates, or by the whole theocentric community, treated as a properly organized and well-guided political and "theological body" attended to the principle of *maat* i.e., "truth" and "justice" in the ancient Egyptian sense of the word.

Ancient philosophers tried to awaken the divine light through the noetic vision (*noesis*) and to touch the divine Intellect and thus may be described as moksha centric. This calls for few comments given the reservations expressed by Indian philosopher Daya Krishna on this characterization.

*Moksha* (though understood somewhat differently) is the ultimate though not the immediate goal of Indian philosophy, Muslim philosophy, Platonic-Phythogorean philosophy, Chinese Philosophy and many other traditional philosophies. *Moksha* centrism, is explained by Harsh Narain is this serves to give purpose and direction to philosophy and proves to be a bulwark against battling in the clouds, which Sri Aurobindo calls the 'besetting sin of metaphysics,' and which is the bane of unbridled, directionless thinking for thinking's sake. Praxiological commitment makes all the differences. Modern Western philosophy lacks such a serious purpose, direction and orientation. Nobody knows what it is about to do. Ancient

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philosophy aimed at enlightenment and felicity with or without salvation at the great denouement, whereas current philosophy aims at dry clarity and mechanical precision on their own account.This explains close association of religion and philosophy in traditional cultures. This also explains ultimate religious-mystical aim of philosophy as preparation for death in Plato.

Who is a genuine student of Platonic philosophy? Taylor's answer deserves cognizance. By a legitimate student of the Platonic philosophy, I mean the one, who, both from nature and education is properly qualified for such an arduous undertaking. He is the one who possesses a naturally good disposition; is sagacious, acute and is inflamed with an ardent desire for the acquisition of wisdom and truth; who from his childhood has been well instructed in the mathematical disciplines. Besides this, has spent whole days and frequently the greater part of the night, in profound meditation and like one triumphantly sailing over a raging sea, or skilfully piercing through an army of foes, has successfully encountered hostile multitude of doubts. In short, who has never considered wisdom as a thing of trifling estimation and easy access, but as that which cannot be obtained without the most generous and severe endurance, and the intrinsic worth of which surpasses all corporeal good, far more than the ocean, the fleeting bubble which floats on its surface.

Plato makes radical claims for importance of philosophy in human life. Richard Kraut sums it up so well:

Because philosophy scrutinizes assumptions that other studies merely take for granted, it alone can give us genuine understanding; since it discovers a realm of objects inaccessible to the senses and yields an organized system of truths that go far beyond and in some cases undermine

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common sense, it should lead to a transformation in the way we live our lives and arrange our political affairs. It is an autonomous subject and not the instrument of any other discipline, power or creed; on the contrary, because it alone can grasp what is most important in human life, all other human endeavours should be subordinate to it.

Plato scholars have amply shown untenability of such familiar charges as Plato's doubt about the existence or disdain of the sensory or visible world. Plato is also accused of Utopian idealism. Plato has only expressed the point of relationship of dependency between the visible and intellectual/spiritual worlds. It is worth quoting Sworder here: *To fully understand how this world is the most perfect possible realization of the fullest totality of the most exquisite ideas is a Herculean task. The deepest seclusion is needed to complete a thorough study of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music and dialectic. After these come their applications to the natural sciences. These studies are typically pursued through early adulthood to middle age. Doing that, the meaning of our human life emerges as a vision in which no further parting is possible between the absolute and the relative, the eternal and the temporal. There is apocatastasis. This is the goal of Plato's theory.*

Other charges of elitism through exclusion of nearly all citizens from political participation and state's suppression of dissent or unorthodox ideas have also been addressed by many scholars and it has been pointed out that he took ample measures against possibility of corruption in the ruling elite and his objective is promoting well-being of all citizens. "If the citizens fail to understand where their own good lies, then it is the proper task of political leaders to educate them." One may also point out how little is Plato read as he deserves to be

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read – may be such people as Voegelin, Taylor and Simone Weil – before he is accused of this or that. The real meaning of aristocracy of Spirit is one of the notions in him that has been almost forgotten today. It's also noteworthy to point that Plato is concerned with fostering "a deep feeling of community among all the citizens, in spite of the fact that they cannot all share an equal understanding of the human good." Another important point to be noted in defense of Plato is his recourse to dialogue form that provides "a natural way to air challenges the reader might be expected to make to the theories under discussion; assigning an objection to a speaker is a vivid way of clarifying and defending the views being presented." And at that point it is worth remembering in an age that takes pride in honoring books and cultivating literacy is that "insight comes through discussion with others and not through mere reading." Indeed "what better way to give expression to this warning against the misuse of books than to make each of one's works a dialogue?" Far from being an enemy of truly open society as likes of Popper would have us believe, it is "more plausible to take the Republic to contain a theory of what is good for any individual and to presuppose that an ideal state is the one that best promotes the good of its individual citizens." Schofield, among others, has clarified the notion of a noble lie in Plato in a manner that should warn against simplistic construal and consequent dismissal of Plato on moral grounds or reading him in Straussian fashion that questions the commitment of Plato to higher spiritual ideals. One may here note that in Plato's canon poets are censored for telling falsehoods, that trinity of truth, beauty and goodness is sacrosanct, that his insistence on the need for lying to sustain the political order is "all of a piece with his general treatment of culture and society more broadly. The

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Cave analogy of Book represents uneducated humanity as imprisoned by illusions, feeding uncritically on third-hand images of reality... philosophers must be compelled to return to the Cave to exercise their function as rulers, the implication is presumably that most of them are to govern, although citizens of an ideal city, have very little ability to resist deception or to respond to anything better than images of truth." And that "Education *has* to begin with stories like this'broadly speaking false, though there is some truth in them.' In other words, the culture is and must be saturated with myths that are literally false and deceptive if believed to be factually true. But the deception is legitimate if like the Noble Lie and the stories Socrates' *wants* the young to hear, they are morally admirable fictions that drug people into sound convictions and lead them to virtue. What is wrong with Homer and Hesiod is not in the end that they lied, but that there was nothing morally admirable in most of the lies they told." We also need to note Socrates' distinction between lies in the soul and lies in speech and his point that the true lie is to be abhorred and it is hated not only by gods but by humans. In contrast lying in speech has uses (for humans, not for gods) who don't merit hatred. "Something false told by a doctor to his patient or a General to his troops is not a lie provided their intention is not bad. Just so, the Stoics' wise person says false things from a morally good disposition. The implication of their radical conception of lying is the counter-intuitive proposition that the Platonic Socrates' useful medicinal lies are not lies at all." Regarding true lie, one reads in Plato: "All I am saying is that to lie, to be deceived, to be ignorant about reality in one's soul and to hold and possess the lie there, is the last thing anyone would want.' And this the true lie is then defined as 'the ignorance in the soul of the

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person who has been deceived."

Justification for lying for the benefit of the city or in special cases in war and healing relationships have been forthcoming across traditions while the absolutist position defended by Augustine that puts blanket ban on lying of any kind has had few defenders today as in ancient or medieval times. A more important point to be noted may further help in putting things in perspective and explain the position of many Muslim philosophers/Sufis who echo Plato.

This is the point implied in Plato's dictum "Don't take affairs of life too seriously." Although they tell politically expedient lies, philosopher rulers will hate doing it. Socrates asks: 'Do you think that the mind which can take a large view and contemplate the whole time and the whole of reality is likely to regard human life as of any importance?' Everything to do with ruling—as preoccupied exclusively with the affairs of humans—must for a philosopher be irksome triviality and that presumably includes the need to tell lies."

(The author is a noted writer based in Srinagar.)

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# SHEIKH-UL-ALAM AS KASHMIR'S OWN EMANCIPATION THEOLOGIAN

**Basharat Shameem**

Sheikh-ul Alam, commonly referred to as Sheikh Noor-ud Din Noorani or Nund Rishi holds a significant place in the hearts of both Muslims and Pandits in Kashmir, serving as an essential emblem of Kashmiriyat. He is justly celebrated as the patron saint of Kashmir, whose teachings contributed to the deeper articulation of the concept of Kashmiriyat. This October marked the 587th anniversary of his passing away. Sheikh-ul Alam is acknowledged for founding the Rishi order during the fifteenth century. As a natural ascetic, he devoted himself wholly to meditation, the remembrance of God, prayer and spiritual discipline. He expressed his thoughts in his verses known as Shruks. Sheikh-ul Alam may not have established a formal and systematic theology of emancipation; however, he dedicated himself fervently to the pursuit of socio-economic reform, approaching the issue from a faith-oriented approach. There existed a fundamental coherence and evolution in the life and philosophy of Sheikh-ul Alam, shaped by the influences of Sufi Islam and other faiths native to Kashmir. This coherence and evolution in Sheikh-ul Alam's thought encapsulates the rich and continuous cultural heritage of Kashmir.

Emancipation theology is recognized as a significant intellectual discourse that centers on the concept of emancipation in relation to discrimination, inequality and societal regression. This movement, often viewed as an

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unconventional interpretation of religious doctrines, portrays religious leaders as both redeemers and liberators for marginalized communities. The main aim of emancipation theology is to empower believers to actively pursue socio-economic and political reforms for the benefit of the impoverished and disenfranchised. The theology of emancipation, although a relatively recent development, is rooted in a universal experience. This experience pertains to circumstances characterized by backwardness, enslavement, inequality, dependency and extreme marginalization, juxtaposed with a foundation of religious faith. In this context, emancipation theologies align broadly with the paradigms or ideal struggles of numerous religious figures.

Emancipation theology encompasses significant practical action and reform, in addition to critical hermeneutic mediation. In the 15th century Kashmir, Sheikh-ul Alam undertook the role of critical hermeneutic mediator, employing the same approach for the emancipation of the Kashmiri people in religious, social and economic dimensions. The historical context significantly influenced the development of Sheikh-ul Alam's religious and theological perspectives. As a result, his theology serves as an autobiography, reflecting both his personal identity and the essence of Kashmiriyat.

Sheikh-ul Alam's social initiatives were grounded in his Sufi humanistic perspective of theological belief. The concepts of the Divine and the individual form the foundation of Sheikh-ul Alam's faith, manifesting prominently in his teachings and actions:

*Upon feeling the oneness of God*
*I promptly submitted to His authority*
*Merging my being in his Omnipresence*
*I remain in awe of his supreme Divinity*

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Sheikh-ul Alam possessed a strong self-awareness regarding the belief that the Sufi humanist principles of compassion, equality, pursuit of justice and truth, tolerance and reconciliation serve as essential elements in addressing political, social, and religious conflicts. He journeyed widely across Kashmir valley, living in different places while imparting his teachings on simplicity, purity, piety, reverence for God and love for humanity:

*Penitence shall enable you to traverse the vast expanse of this earthly realm*
*Repentance serves as the boat that carries one across the stream*

Sheikh-ul Alam, while rooted in the context of early medieval feudal Kashmir, envisioned an emancipated society that transcended narrow visio, advocating for a universal approach to human issues, encompassing all humanity and various aspects of life. Central to his universal perspective was the belief in God as the ultimate source and focal point. He offered this vision as a significant counterpoint to the prevailing systems of feudal monarchy, caste discrimination and exploitative religious practices by the powerful clergy. In alignment with his fundamental Sufi-Rishi principles, Sheikh-ul Alam posited that the path to divine realization lies in the harmonious integration of self, truth and tolerance. He stands as a significant religious leader in Kashmir's history whose deep faith inspired him to engage actively in the pursuit of social liberation. His life and teachings exemplify the potential for a profound spiritual transformation of society from within, illustrating how the thoughtful application of advanced theological principles can facilitate socio-economic progress.

As a true Sufi humanist, Sheikh-ul Alam held the conviction that faith and religion have the potential to promote a common good for humanity when viewed through a strictly humanist

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lens. He asserted that authentic faith motivates individuals to selflessly assist others. Sheikh-ul Alam championed the idea of universal brotherhood, advocating that one's sense of belonging should not be determined by religion or any other affiliations:

*We hold no resentment towards each other*
*If our love brings together all, both Hindus and Muslims*
*Then it is certain that God is pleased with us*

Sheikh-ul Alam's devotion and spirituality provided purpose and guidance in his life, fostering his conviction in the interconnectedness of existence and his dedication to the path of love. His commitment to serving humanity was integral to his religious principles. As he immersed himself in societal service, his spiritual consciousness expanded. Consequently, he shifted from a self-focused perspective to one centered on the spirit. His aspiration for a fair and equitable social structure was rooted in the belief that personal change and societal change are interconnected. It is something that is a key characteristic of emancipation theologians.

Even after six centuries, Shęikh-ul Alam remains a symbol of spirituality and virtue for all Kashmiris. In the vision he aspired to create, there was space for all beliefs, castes and religions. He did not perceive differences as obstacles; instead, he embraced them as avenues toward the attainment of the ultimate Truth. He understood the interconnectedness of the inner and outer realms, the personal and political spheres, as well as the religious and secular dimensions, recognizing a fundamental relationship between individual and societal transformation. He firmly believed that the renewal and emancipation of his own existence were intrinsically linked to the renewal and emancipation of his community. His life was dedicated to the service of God and

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humanity. For him, achieving religious and spiritual enlightenment was insufficient for societal transformation unless it was accompanied by tangible reform and active engagement. In his perspective, escapism was never a viable option. It is important to note that ancient Hindu traditions placed significant emphasis on the philosophy of Karma Yoga, which advocates for spiritual realization through social action. It had a significant influence on the Kashmiri Rishi order. Likewise, in the Islamic tradition, the concept of "Amal-e-Sualeh" or virtuous actions, serves as the foundation of faith.

In the contemporary times which are sadly characterized by numerous conflicts and divisions, the ethical principles imparted by Sheikh-ul Alam are increasingly essential for guiding our efforts towards a better world through faith, peace and tolerance.

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# BHAND PATHER

## THE SOUL OF KASHMIRI FOLK THEATRE

**Mohammad Yaseen**

Bhand Pather, a traditional folk theatre form of Kashmir, is an extraordinary blend of drama, music, dance, and satire. Rooted in the cultural soil of the Kashmir Valley, this art form reflects the region's unique identity and has been a vital part of its social fabric for centuries. Through a mixture of humor, irony, and powerful storytelling, Bhand Pather has served as both entertainment and a medium for social commentary. However, despite its cultural significance, this traditional theatre is at risk of fading into obscurity due to various socio-economic challenges.

**Origins and Evolution**

The origins of Bhand Pather are somewhat obscure, with different scholars offering various theories regarding its inception. However, it is generally agreed that Bhand Pather has been performed in Kashmir for several centuries, and its roots are closely tied to the region's social, political and cultural history.

Historically, Bhand Pather performances were closely associated with religious and cultural festivals, where they played a crucial role in communal celebrations. The art form is believed to have developed from the traditional storytelling practices of the region, which combined music, dance and narrative to entertain and educate. Over time, Bhand Pather evolved into a distinct theatrical form, characterized by its satirical style and use of irony to comment on social issues.

One of the unique aspects of Bhand Pather is its flexibility and adaptability. Unlike many other traditional theatre forms,

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Bhand Pather has never been confined to a fixed script or format. Instead, the performances are largely improvised, with the actors drawing on their knowledge of local folklore, current events, and social issues to create a dynamic and engaging performance. This improvisational nature has allowed Bhand Pather to remain relevant and resonant, even as the social and political landscape of Kashmir has changed.

**Structure and Style**

Bhand Pather performances are characterized by their vibrant energy and dynamic use of music, dance and drama. The plays typically begin with a musical prelude, featuring traditional Kashmiri instruments like the 'surnai' (a wind instrument similar to a shehnai), 'dhol' (a double-headed drum), and 'nagada'* (a kettle drum). The music sets the tone for the performance, creating a lively and festive atmosphere that draws in the audience.

The performances are usually held in open spaces, such as village squares or courtyards, and are open to all members of the community. This accessibility is a key feature of Bhand Pather, as it ensures that the performances are not confined to a particular class or group but are instead a shared communal experience. The actors, known as 'Bhands', are often dressed in colorful costumes and masks, which add to the visual appeal of the performance.

The structure of a Bhand Pather play is loose and flexible, allowing for a great deal of improvisation. While there are often some elements of a pre-planned storyline or theme, much of the dialogue and action is improvised by the actors based on their interaction with the audience and their knowledge of local issues and events. This improvisational style gives Bhand Pather a unique vibrancy and immediacy,

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as the actors are able to respond in real-time to the reactions and feedback of the audience.

**Themes and Content**

One of the most distinctive features of Bhand Pather is its use of satire and humor to address social issues and critique authority. The plays often feature a central theme or story that serves as a vehicle for social commentary, with the actors using humor, irony and wit to highlight the absurdities and injustices of everyday life.

Traditionally, Bhand Pather performances focused on themes drawn from local folklore, mythology and history. Stories of legendary heroes, mythological creatures and historical events were used to convey moral lessons and entertain the audience. However, over time, the content of Bhand Pather evolved to include more contemporary themes and issues. Today, Bhand Pather plays often address current social and political issues, such as corruption, inequality and social injustice.

One of the central themes in many Bhand Pather plays is the critique of authority and power. The performances often depict the struggles of ordinary people against oppression, corruption and exploitative sections of the society. Through satire and humor, the Bhands expose the abuses of power and highlight the resilience and strength of the common people against corrupt forces. This focus on social justice and resistance to oppression has made Bhand Pather a powerful medium for political commentary and a voice for the marginalized.

Another common theme in Bhand Pather is the celebration of community and collective action. The plays often depict the triumph of good over evil through the efforts and solidarity of

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the community. This emphasis on communal values and collective action reflects the importance of community in Kashmiri culture and serves as a reminder of the strength and resilience of the people.

**Bhand Pather in Kashmiri Culture**

Bhand Pather is more than just a form of entertainment; it is an integral part of Kashmiri cultural identity. The performances serve as a living archive of the region's history, folklore and social values, preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge from one generation to the next.

One of the key functions of Bhand Pather is its role as a medium for social education and awareness. Through their performances, the Bhands are able to raise awareness of important social issues and encourage dialogue and reflection within the community. The use of humor and satire makes the performances engaging and accessible, allowing them to reach a wide audience and effectively convey their message.

In addition to its role in social education, Bhand Pather also serves as a form of resistance and resilience. Throughout its history, Bhand Pather has been used as a tool for political commentary and critique, giving a voice to the voiceless and challenging the status quo. In times of social and political upheaval, Bhand Pather has provided a means for the people of Kashmir to express their dissent and resist oppression through art.

Bhand Pather is also an important medium for cultural preservation and continuity. The performances serve as a repository of Kashmiri folklore, mythology and history, preserving these stories and traditions for future generations. The improvisational nature of the performances allows for a dynamic and evolving art form that can adapt to the changing needs and realities of the community, ensuring its continued

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relevance and vitality.

**Challenges Facing Bhand Pather**

Despite its cultural significance and historical importance, Bhand Pather is facing a number of challenges that threaten its survival. These challenges are multifaceted and stem from a combination of socio-economic, political and cultural factors.

1. Financial Constraints and Lack of SupportOne of the most pressing challenges facing Bhand Pather is the lack of financial support and patronage. Many of the artists involved in Bhand Pather struggle to make a living from their craft. The decline in traditional patronage, coupled with limited opportunities for paid performances, has left many Bhands in a precarious financial situation. Without adequate funding and support, many artists are forced to abandon the art form in search of more stable and lucrative employment.

The lack of institutional support from both the government and non-governmental organizations has exacerbated this problem. While there have been some initiatives aimed at reviving and supporting Bhand Pather, these efforts have often been sporadic and limited in scope. The absence of sustained funding and support has made it difficult for Bhand Pather to thrive in a modern context.

2. Cultural Shifts and Modernization

Another significant challenge facing Bhand Pather is the impact of cultural shifts and modernization. As Kashmir becomes more integrated into the globalized world, traditional art forms like Bhand Pather are increasingly overshadowed by more contemporary forms of entertainment. The influence of television, film, and digital media has changed the way people consume entertainment and information, leading to a decline in interest in traditional

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performances.

This cultural shift is particularly evident among younger generations, who may not have the same connection to traditional art forms as their elders. The changing cultural landscape has made it more difficult for Bhand Pather to attract new audiences and engage younger viewers, leading to concerns about the long-term viability of the art form.

3. Social and Political Instability

The social and political instability in Kashmir has also had a profound impact on Bhand Pather. The region has experienced decades of turmoil, which have disrupted traditional cultural practices and made it difficult for artists to continue their work. The situation has also limited opportunities for performances and reduced the availability of funding and support for cultural initiatives.

In addition, the use of satire and political content of some many Bhand Pather performances has, at times, led to increased scrutiny from various quarters.

4. Migration and Changing Livelihoods

Economic pressures and social instability have also led to significant migration and changes in livelihoods among the Bhand community. Many Bhands have been forced to leave their villages in search of better economic opportunities, moving to cities or even outside the region. This migration has disrupted traditional networks and communities, making it more difficult for artists to maintain their craft and pass on their knowledge to future generations.

The changing economic landscape has also led to a shift in livelihoods among the Bhand community. Many artists have taken up alternative occupations, such as weaving, carpentry and other trades, to supplement their income. While these

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alternative livelihoods provide much-needed financial stability, they also take time and energy away from the practice of Bhand Pather, further contributing to the decline of the art form.

**Efforts to Revive and Sustain Bhand Pather**

Despite these challenges, there have been concerted efforts to revive and sustain Bhand Pather as a vital part of Kashmiri culture. These efforts have come from various quarters, including individual artists, cultural organizations and above all from several central and UT government bodies. These initiatives have focused on promoting the art form, providing financial support to artists and encouraging the participation of younger generations in Bhand Pather.

1. Revival Projects and Workshops

One of the notable initiatives aimed at reviving Bhand Pather is the "Revival of Bhand Pather" project, supported by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi. This project played a pivotal role in bringing together traditional Bhand performers from across Kashmir to rejuvenate this fading art form. A key aspect of this initiative was the organization of workshops and performances that not only engaged seasoned Bhands but also attracted new talent.

For instance, in 2011, a 10-day residential workshop was organized in Gagribal, Srinagar, involving 20 representatives from different theatre groups across Kashmir. These workshops provided a platform for the exchange of ideas and allowed artists to create new plays that reflected contemporary issues. Themes that emerged during these workshops included corruption, drug abuse, flaws in the educational system and the desire for peace and normalcy in the region. These themes were then adapted into theatrical productions in the Bhand Pather style and performed across

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the valley, reaching large audiences and reviving interest in the art form.

The success of the 2011 workshop led to subsequent workshops in 2012 and 2015, where 40 new plays were produced and staged. These efforts have been crucial in keeping Bhand Pather alive and relevant, demonstrating its ability to adapt to modern themes while retaining its traditional essence.

2. Cultural Festivals and Public Performances

Cultural festivals and public performances have also played an essential role in the revival of Bhand Pather. Festivals dedicated to folk arts and theatre provide a platform for Bhands to showcase their talent and attract new audiences. These events often include performances, workshops, and exhibitions that highlight the richness and diversity of Kashmiri culture, including Bhand Pather.

Public performances, particularly in open-air settings, have been instrumental in reaching out to the community and rekindling interest in Bhand Pather. By performing in village squares, market places, and during cultural functions, Bhands are able to engage directly with their audience, creating a shared cultural experience that reinforces the communitarian nature of the art form.

Additionally, some Bhands have started performing in urban centers and even outside Kashmir, taking their art to new audiences and generating wider recognition and appreciation for Bhand Pather. These efforts have not only helped in preserving the art form but have also created new opportunities for artists to earn a livelihood from their craft.

3. Institutional Support and Training Programs

While the lack of sustained institutional support has been a

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challenge for Bhand Pather, there have been efforts to address this issue through targeted training programs and support for artists. Some cultural organizations and NGOs have initiated training programs that aim to provide Bhands with the skills and resources they need to sustain their art form.

For example, training workshops focused on theatrical techniques, scriptwriting and performance skills have been organized to help Bhands enhance their craft and adapt to modern audiences. These workshops often involve collaboration with theatre professionals and cultural experts, providing Bhands with valuable insights and guidance.

In addition, there have been efforts to document and archive Bhand Pather performances, creating a repository of scripts, songs and performance techniques that can be used as a reference for future generations. This documentation helps preserve the cultural heritage of Bhand Pather and ensures that the knowledge and skills associated with the art form are not lost.

4. Engaging the Younger Generation

One of the key challenges facing Bhand Pather is the need to engage the younger generation and ensure the continuity of the art form. Many revival efforts have focused on attracting young people to Bhand Pather, both as performers and as audiences.

Educational programs and workshops specifically designed for young people have been implemented to introduce them to the art form and encourage their participation. These programs often include training in acting, music and dance, as well as opportunities to perform in Bhand Pather plays. By involving young people in the creative process, these initiatives aim to instill a sense of pride and ownership in the cultural heritage of Bhand Pather.

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Schools and colleges have also been targeted as venues for Bhand Pather performances and workshops, providing students with a firsthand experience of this unique art form. By integrating Bhand Pather into the educational curriculum and extracurricular activities, these efforts aim to create a new generation of performers and enthusiasts who can carry the tradition forward.

5. Government and Non-Governmental Initiatives

Governmental and non-governmental organizations have also played a role in supporting the revival of Bhand Pather. While support has been inconsistent, some initiatives have provided crucial funding and resources for artists and cultural organizations working to preserve the art form.

For instance, grants and funding from cultural bodies like the Sangeet Natak Akademi and J&K Academy of Art, Culture & Languages have enabled the organization of workshops, performances and training programs that have helped sustain Bhand Pather. Similarly, local government initiatives have occasionally provided financial support and resources for cultural festivals and public performances.

Non-governmental organizations and cultural groups have also contributed to the revival efforts, often working in partnership with local communities and artists. These organizations have helped raise awareness of the challenges facing Bhand Pather and have advocated for greater support and recognition for the art form.

**Future of Bhand Pather**

The future of Bhand Pather depends on a combination of continued efforts to preserve and promote the art form, increased support from both governmental and non-governmental bodies and the active engagement of younger

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generations. While the challenges facing Bhand Pather are significant, the resilience and creativity of its artists and the enduring appeal of the art form offer hope for its survival and revival.

1. Role of Community and Cultural Organizations

Community involvement will be crucial in ensuring the future of Bhand Pather. Local communities have traditionally been the primary supporters and patrons of Bhand Pather, and their continued engagement is vital for the art form's survival. Efforts to revive Bhand Pather should focus on strengthening community ties and encouraging local participation in performances, workshops, and cultural events.

Cultural organizations and NGOs also have a critical role to play in supporting Bhand Pather. By providing funding, resources and training opportunities, these organizations can help address some of the financial and logistical challenges facing Bhands. Additionally, cultural organizations can serve as advocates for Bhand Pather, raising awareness of its cultural significance and lobbying for greater support from government bodies.

2. Leveraging Modern Technology and Media

One potential avenue for revitalizing Bhand Pather is through the use of modern technology and media. Digital platforms, social media and online streaming services offer new opportunities for Bhands to reach a wider audience and generate interest in their performances.

For example, recording and sharing Bhand Pather performances online can help introduce the art form to audiences beyond Kashmir and attract new fans and supporters. Similarly, using social media to promote performances and engage with audiences can help build a

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community of enthusiasts and supporters who can advocate for the preservation and promotion of Bhand Pather.

In addition, technology can be used to enhance the training and education of Bhands. Online workshops, video tutorials and digital archives can provide valuable resources for artists looking to develop their skills and knowledge of Bhand Pather. By leveraging modern technology, Bhand Pather can adapt to the changing cultural landscape and find new ways to thrive in the digital age.

3. Policy Support and Institutional Recognition

For Bhand Pather to survive and flourish, it is essential that it receives greater recognition and support from governmental bodies and cultural institutions. Policy support in the form of funding, grants and resources can provide the financial stability needed for Bhands to continue their work and pass on their knowledge to future generations.

Cultural institutions and policymakers should also recognize the importance of Bhand Pather as a valuable cultural heritage of Kashmir and work to protect and promote it. This could include initiatives to integrate Bhand Pather into educational curricula, support for cultural festivals and public performances, and efforts to document and archive the art form for future generations.

4. Encouraging Artistic Innovation and Collaboration

While preserving the traditional elements of Bhand Pather is crucial, there is also room for artistic innovation and collaboration. Encouraging Bhands to experiment with new themes, narratives and performance styles can help keep the art form fresh and relevant in a changing cultural landscape.

Collaborations with artists from other parts of the country and

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other disciplines can also provide new perspectives and ideas, enriching the tradition of Bhand Pather and expanding its appeal to a broader audience. By embracing innovation and collaboration, Bhand Pather can continue to evolve and adapt, ensuring its continued vitality and resonance.

**Conclusion**

Bhand Pather is a unique and culturally significant folk theatre form that has played a vital role in the social, cultural, and political life of Kashmir for centuries. Despite the challenges it faces, the resilience and creativity of its artists, combined with the enduring appeal of its satirical and engaging performances, offer hope for its revival and continued relevance.

Efforts to preserve and promote Bhand Pather must focus on strengthening community ties, supporting artists, engaging younger generations, and leveraging modern technology and media. With the right support and a commitment to preserving this invaluable cultural heritage, Bhand Pather can continue to thrive and provide a voice for the people of Kashmir for generations to come.

By recognizing and supporting the importance of Bhand Pather, we not only preserve a unique art form but also honor the rich cultural heritage of Kashmir and the resilience of its people. As a living tradition that reflects the social and cultural realities of the region, Bhand Pather has the power to connect people, inspire change and foster a sense of community, identity and national integration. It is up to all of us to ensure that this vibrant and dynamic art form continues to thrive, serving as a testament to the creativity, spirit and resilience of the Kashmiri people.

(The author is a cultural activist , based in Jammu.)

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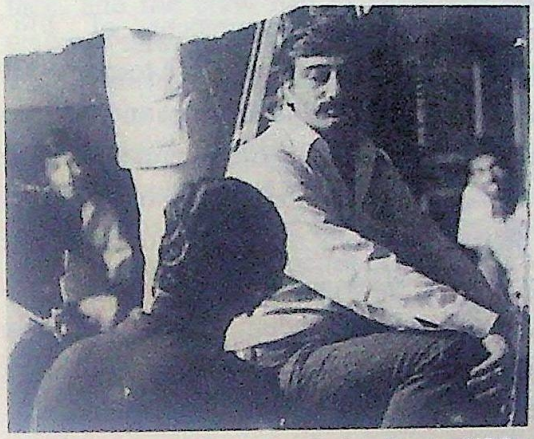
# AVTAR KAUL AND THE MAKING OF 27 DOWN

**Avtar Motta**



**(Avtar Kaul on the sets of 27 Down.**
**.Photo Courtesy...Family of Avtar Kaul)**

Avtar Kaul was born in Kashmir. While his family shifted to Delhi in 1949, he joined them later after completing his studies. Arriving in Delhi as a fresh college graduate, he joined the Ministry of External Affairs in 1958. In 1960, he moved to the US and enrolled to learn film direction at a film institute in New York city in the US, he learnt everything about filmmaking .Returning to India in 1970 with his American wife Anne, he decided to settle in Mumbai. In India, he worked with the Ivory Merchant production house and acquired a wide knowledge of world cinema, Indian films

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and the French 'New Wave Cinema'. It was during this period, the Film Finance Corporation helped MrinalSen to produce Bhuvan Shome,Basu Chatterjee to make Sara Akash and Mani Kaul for his Uski Roti.The trend that came to be known as 'Parallel Cinema' had already become visible. AvtarKaul was keen about adding his name to this Parallel Cinema. With the encouragement of FFC chairperson BK Karanjia, Avtar set out in 1972 to make his first film. He started looking for some good script and the idea of '27 Down' started taking shape. The film is based on the Hindi novel, 'Athara Sooraj Ke Paudhe' by Ramesh Bakshi, a book that he had picked up from a Delhi bookshop. He sounded his younger brother, Predhuman Kaul about the project. Pradhuman Kaul quit his job with the Indian Air Force to help his brother on a project that was a challenge for the brothers. Pradhuman Kaul remembers this:-

I had never seen a shoot before that. We shot on more than 40 actual locations. The film could be made only because the people involved with the film were all young.The most prominent crew member was Raakhee, who was already a movie star. Avtar initially wanted to cast director Bimal Roy's daughter Aparajita in the lead role. Rakhee came on the recommendation of FFC's BK Karanjia. She accepted the role because she liked the storyline.

Avtar Kaul signed Bansi Chandragupt as the art director for the project. Bansi Chandragupt worked with Satyajit Ray, Jean Renoir, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Basu Chatterjee, Ismail Merchant, James Ivory and Aparna Sen. Narinder Singh, the well-known sound recordist was also signed for the project. Narinder Singh had also worked with

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The film had many first-timers including A K Bir, the Film and Television Institute of India-trained cinematographer who was 22 years old at that time and had never shot a feature film.The crew faced many problems. Raakhee was a known face, and the crew had to show her travelling in trains or walking through crowds. Shooting with her in public spaces and platforms was difficult and tough. For some shots, the unit had to seek the help of the police. However, everything kept rolling and moving in a positive direction.And Avtar had complete confidence in M K Raina who had graduated from NSD and was noticed for his acting skills in some popular Hindi plays .The production took nearly two years as the Kaul brothers ran out of money. They had initially pooled around three lakh from their sources.The film cost them around eight lakhs and they had to raise a loan of about five lakh.as a filmmaker, Avtar was a hard taskmaster. He didn't even spare his brother. "He would shout at me if I made a mistake," PradhumanKaul said. "A unit member was combing his hair while recording sound. Avtar yelled, "You should have a boom in your hand, not a comb".The shooting at ever busy VT station in Mumbai was done in a secret manner .Nobody knew that a film was being shot. M K Raina in his dress appeared like a genuine TTE (Travelling Ticket Examiner). Even people were seeking information on trains from him. By the time people came to know about shooting, the team '27 Down 'had packed up. The camera was placed away from the public gaze. Mumbi based film-maker Yusuf Bhat said this to the author:-

Avtar was a very friendly person. I vividly remember he had taken two rooms in the YMCA, Mumbai Central and used to run his office from

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there. He used to live probably in Meher Apartments, Anstey Road those days. Initially, Avtar Kaul had selected me as the editor of the movie. I had signed the contract. The movie was named 58 Down. The name was subsequently changed to '27 Down.' The film had Bansi Chandragupt as the art director. Then Narinder Singh, the sound recordist was also very brilliant. Avtar was much more focussed. He made everyone give 100% to the film. He wanted me to be present at every shot whether indoor or outdoor. I had little time for that. Then we had arguments in the editing room.The negatives were handled by me at the 'Famous Cine Laboratory ', Taradeo. He was thoroughly professional in his approach. He didn't agree to some suggestions. I moved out of the project. But he was a great man. I was paid full remuneration as per the agreement. I believe I was paid 3500/- by him. That was a big amount those days. I am talking of 1972. Late Ravi Patnaik edited the film after I left.'27 Down 'got Filmfare Award but Avtar Kaul didn't live to receive it.

The film was completed with MK Raina and Rakhee in the lead roles. It created some sensation with its cinematography, direction, handling of the story and dialogues. Arvtar Kaul was planning to make another film with M K Raina in the lead role.'27 Down' was finally completed in 1973. It was screened at the Locarno Film Festival the following year, where it was given an Award.

July 20, 1974, AvtarKaul was invited to dinner at a sea-facing Bungalow in the Walkeshwar area of South Mumbai. A K Bir was at his rented apartment with a few friends. That night, Bir got a call from Delhi, informing him that 27 Down had won two National Film Awards. It was a time to celebrate. A K Bir remembers this:

"We were expecting Avtar to come and celebrate. However, at around 1 am or so, I got a call from the police, asking me to identify a body."

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They learnt that Avtar Kaul had gone to the beach. He was sitting on the parapet along with a friend who lost balance and slipped into the roaring Arabian Sea. Kaul dived into the sea to save his friend, but neither survived. The roaring Monsoon waves proved fatal.Avtar was taken first to one hospital and then to another, and he died on the way. Prad human Kaul wasn't in Mumbai at the time the tragedy struck the family. He had returned to Delhi to look after his ailing wife. Prad human remembers:-

"It was shocking for all of us. We had heard that he was getting the Award just the previous night."

Avtar Kaul's wife Anne, had lost her father around the same time, and couldn't travel to India for the funeral. Anne, returned to the US halfway during the shoot. Avtar Kaul's untimely death was a great setback to his brother Prad human. He was deeply disturbed and could not do anything in the cinema after that. He returned to Delhi and worked for

a while with a theatre group and later joined an insurance company.

(The author is a noted writer and archivist presently based in Jammu.)

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# REVISITING THE GREATEST MINDS AND IDEAS OF ALL TIME

**Suman K Sharma**

It was a happy chance that I bought *Essays by Will Durant,* compiled and edited by John Little and published by Simon and Schuster, India. Actually, I had set my heart on Asimov's *Chronology of Science and Discovery*. But at that time, 800 pages seemed too much, both for my pocket and my patience. For I was but a poor pensioner.

I settled instead for *The Greatest Mind.* Coming from a lesser mortal mind, the title sounded pretentious. But Will Durant (1885-1981) is another proposition altogether. His universally hailed *The Story of Philosophy* (1926) is said to have made its publishers a global presence. He devoted half a century writing the eleven-volume, *The Story of Civilization*. Through his wide learning and delectable style, the savant brought such an arcane subject as philosophy, within the easy reach of lay readers, and left them asking for more. Among the honours and awards showered on him were the Pulitzer Prize (1968) and the US President's Medal of Freedom.

*The Greatest Mind* has half a dozen essays in all, as also a brief introduction by John Little. The first of the essays comes forth as the author's own prelude to what is to follow. Self-deprecatingly titled *A Shameless Worship of Heroes,* this 3-page piece convincingly establishes Will Durant's firm belief in the prime importance of great men in making this

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world what it is. "'The history of the world' is properly the history of its great men," he asserts. The order of the succeeding essays is in full accord with the tone set by the first: *The Ten "Greatest" Thinkers, The Ten "Greatest" Poets, The One Hundred "Best" Books for An Education, The Ten "Peaks" of Human Progress,* and lastly, *Twelve Vital Dates in the World History.* Mark the use of quotation marks that enclose the superlatives 'the greatest', 'the best' and 'the peaks'. The philosopher in Will Durant was wary of the risk of contrariness he was taking. The assertions made in the essays are his and his alone. You and I are free to disagree with him. That by itself makes the slim volume an exciting challenge to meet.

The gentle, one must say avuncular and voice of the author adds to the charm of the book. Talking of the books of his choice in Chapter 4, he devotes almost a thousand words (pages 64-66) to create an 'atmosphere' for the prospective readers. Here is his putative library '...spacious and dark and cool, safe from alien lights and sounds, with slender casements opening on quiet fields, voluptuous chairs inviting communion and reverie...' and so on. An astute philosopher as he is, Will Durant never wavers from his main objective, which is to take his readers to 'another world, containing the selected excellence of a hundred generations; not quite so fair and vital as the actual world of nature and human enterprise, but abounding nevertheless in unsuspecting wisdom and beauty unexplored.'

A word of caution: India and Indians like Buddha, Tagore and

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Gandhi do not find an explicit place in the book. The Vedas, the Upanishads, even the Gita are not mentioned. Since Will Durant passed away forty years ago, readers of the present generation may find some of his averments hard to digest, if not dated. For instance, in Chapter Five, which is about 'the peaks' of human progress, the omission of Artificial Intelligence (IA) would seem glaring, especially to the thirty-year olds and the younger lot. Then, doesn't the tag 'of all time' in the title appear dismissive of the progress the world has made practically in every field since Will Durant's demise? Perhaps John Little, who has compiled and edited the essays, could in his introduction have seen to such not so insignificant flaws.

Even so, one would like to say, in the manner of Lord Bacon, that *The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time* is a book 'that is to be chewed and digested.'

(The author is a renowned writer, poet, novelist and translator from Jammu, presently based in Delhi.)

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# DONGAE

## SRINAGAR'S FLOATING GEM

**Manzoor Akash**

In those days, *Dongae* boats were used for transportation purposes along the river Jhelum, passing through the heart of Srinagar city. Finding the Indian plains intolerably hot in summer, the British too found the valley of Kashmir, surrounded by snow-clad mountains, an ideal refuge. Although they desired to build houses during Dogra rule, Maharaja Ranbir Singh didn't permit them to construct houses, leading to the adaptation of *Dongae* for housing. Over time *Dongae* boats were renovated leading to an overwhelming imitation and promoting massive growth in the tourism industry. Initially, Dongae was much narrower and shorter than the present-day colorful houseboats which are now a great attraction for tourists.

Made of deodar (cedar) wood, *Dongae* boats were built by *Hanjis* (boatmen) according to their family requirements, with construction generally carried out by local carpenters called *Chan* on a dry flat land. Originally, *Dongae* settlers were *Haenz* (fishermen) on the waters of Jhelum or Dal Lake. However, over time, the purpose of these boats evolved, transforming them into luxurious houseboats with lavishly furnished rooms, deck or evening cocktails areas.

Moored at a suitable site, *Dongae* boats remained anchored

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with interconnecting bridges providing access from one boat to another. Each *Dongae* along the banks of Jhelum had a smaller boat outside to ferry family Amidst the enchanting landscape of Srinagar, lies a true gem that embodies the essence of quirky charm of cultural richness and delightful eccentricity—our traditional Doonga boat locally known as *Dongae,* the exquisite tapestry of which interweaves the threads of antiquity with the contemporary. As you step into the city's hustle and bustle, this relic of past, renovated now into floating palaces, deserve to be recalled and written in golden words. In the clamor of modernity, this symbol of culture overshadowed by the palatial boats has no doubt faded into obscurity. Yet, it is a testament to our rich legacy of heritage and craftsmanship.

The history of *Dongae* in Kashmir, traces back to the 18th century, when a local Kashmiri Pandit Naraindas opened a shop with a thatched roof on the water to cater to the needs of foreigners. Later destroyed by fire, this shop prompted Naraindas to replace it with a Doonga boat. A British army officer and explorer, Sir Francis Younghusband (1863-1942), in his memoirs mentions that the idea of a luxurious floating house was first conceived around 1883 by the sport-loving Englishman M.T. Kennard. In realizing his dream, Kennard was helped by Naraindas which eventually led to a British army constructing the first Doonga boat.

members, arrange essential commodities and help in earning a livelihood.

Today, these floating palaces remain a symbol of the

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region's rich heritage and timeless craftsmanship, offering a unique glimpse into the cultural fabric of Srinagar.

As the days went by, this age-old traditional *Dongae* transformed into a houseboat—the first buyers of which were Europeans. They embellished these floating marvels into palaces of charming architectural splendor, incorporating local craftsmanship and art-work. The interior boasted *Khatamband* ceilings, carpet and *namda* flooring, intricate wooden carvings and colorful frescoes of papier-mâché objects. Exquisite draping of *Aari* and *Suzni* work showcased the region's rich cultural heritage to the world.

Set against the breathtaking backdrop of the Himalayas and Dal Lake, Srinagar's houseboat ambiance captivates on-lookers. These iconic floating palaces, surrounded by verdant views, stand as a testament to region's magnificent architecture and adorable craftsmanship, bustling with energy and wealth. The rich culture of fabled houseboats, dotted along the vibrant Boulevard road, attracts locals and outsiders alike in huge number annually, boosting Kashmir's tourism and hospitality industry.

In the twilight of the years, echoes of the past resound, recalling a time when life in Kashmir was simple, and marked by brotherhood, harmony, peace and tranquility in every corner. We remember an era when nature enthusiasts came here to discover peace while staying in these erstwhile *Dongae* boats, praised by the grand Mughal kings. It is believed that Emperor Jahangir's pleasure barges snaked up and down the Jhelum on moonlit nights, with musicians

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serenading the royal party in other boats.

As we navigate the complexities of modernity, let us heed the call to reconnect with our roots, celebrating the traditions that define Kashmiri heritage. Through conscious choices and collective action, we can ensure that the legacy of *Dongae* remains preserved as a piece of Kashmir's pulsating cultural tapestry for new generations to come. Because this enduring symbol of cultural richness and historical significance will continue to enchant and inspire, reminding us of the beauty and elegance of our past.

(Manzoor Akash is a columnist and educationist, based in Kashmir.)

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# POET IN FOCUS

## PROF SARITA KHAJURIA

**Translated from Dogri by Suman K Sharma**

Dr Sarita Khajuria (born 1973, Jammu), is an Assistant Professor of Dogri in the Higher Education Department of J&K government, since 2010. Her brilliant academic career and the teaching profession have imbued in her the skills of a wordsmith and the sensibilities of a poet. She has to her credit three publications, including a collection of Dogri poems, titled *Atthroo* (Tears); besides two Hindi-to-Dogri translation works – Sham Kashyap's collections of poems *Lahu Mein Phansse Shabd- Rarrade Akkhar* and *Geru Se Likha Hua Naam- Laal Mitti Kanne Likhe Da Naa.*

Sarita Khajuria's poems evoke the mindset of woman in her diverse manifestations – a daughter, a sibling, a lover, a wife and a mother. She decries the dated custom of female foeticide and the still-prevalent prejudice against daughters in some sections of the society, though she seems content with her own femininity. The strong emotional content of some of her poems melds at times with the traditional values, if not with sentimentalism. Her poems also evince her sharp eye on certain trends of our milieu. Her language is simple and unostentatious.

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1

## Daughter's Being

To read those pages
Of your life,
Of your fate
Written in
Delible ink,
I burnt
A lakh *Lohris*[i].
Faced I
Biggest challenges,
Made untold efforts,
I begged,
With folded hands,
To keep them.
Some flew off
From both my hands,
This side,
And that;
Some reached
The hands of those
Who run the world,
Those who erase
The story
Inscribed by *Bidhmata*[ii],
The pages
of your life.

Shutting eyes
To the agony
Of yours and mine
They abhor

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The being
Of a daughter
Growing inside
Her mother's womb

2

## My Share

From the sea of thoughts
Peeps the moon,
And captures
Mom's fine compound.
That compound,
In which I found my wings;
Under the shade of Papa's tree,
Grew cool thick foliage;
The mango tree in Mom's compound
Bore savoury fruit,
I picked each and every mango,
It seems so long ago;
Behind the back of the big brother,
In connivance with the little one,
I indulged in obstinacy, immaturity
And sometimes sheer comedy.
But now all those frolics
Have gradually receded from me,
My shares,
My rights,
Have been snatched from me;
The moon of my memories
Wants its share of light,
The share,
Of which I am a part,

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The extent of that share,
I must receive;
I don't want
Those farms and fields
Nor do I lay any claim on them.
Those palaces and mansions,
Which I have come to seek today,
Are rightfully mine,
For I too am born
Of the very same Pop and Mom,
That being so,
I demand all of that -
Of the gathered wrinkles
On Pop's face
I want a share,
The pains that Mom bore
On my birth
I want a share,
And of the stories connected with those pains;
May my beloved brothers
Never have to face the heat of the sun
Of the harsh sunshine of their compound
A share I want.
May my Pop's farm
Ever flourish!
Of that joyful assurance
The inheritance I want,
This only is my joy,
This only is my wish,
And of every daughter -
This only should be the story
Just this only the share –

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Is all that I want.

## 3
## That Night

A night it was,
A gift it was,
In my partner's share
Fell a defeat
After defeat -
He first got entangled
In the tangles of my hair,
Then drunk he was
In my dulcet talks -
Bathed in the moonlight it was,
A night it was.
Love was there,
Thrill was there,
Beauty was there,
Pride was there;
In that bewildering state,
Fell a shower of passion,
Some vows were taken,
Some promises made;
Conjoining rites
We also performed,
In witness whereof
Were just the two of us,
And none else there was.

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## 4
## Compunctions

Quite often,
When I am sad,
My mind says
It is better
To discard
The body,
Heavy on my mind
Are a few desires,
Which hold up
My flight to nowhere:
After I am gone,
No one should be hurt,
The grief of my loss
Should never wet
The eyes of Ma and Pa,
Siblings form a part
Of the family,
May that part
Be never broken.
Over and above,
Those who are mine,
May their resources
Be not lost;
This is my prayer
Before the Master:
My body,
My form,
May remain intact,

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So I could be complete.
I want them to die:
These my needs,
As also my longings;
For me to live,
I need only to breathe,
And my body to perform.

## 5
## Shirkers

Slackers,
Malingerers,
Shirkers,
Coming in different names;
They follow but one doctrine:
They won't do any work,
And they would have no shame,
They own a limitless supply
Of ruses, pretexts and excuses,
Even the High Above is struck dumb
At their one or the other shenanigan,
They thrive on dishonesty life-long
And
Their tongues are long and strong;
Call them idlers or dawdlers you may,
Yet everywhere they hold their sway;
They preach fine for others to learn,
But prove sods when it's their turn;
By their conduct the world they astound,
Not one, they prey on everyone around;
That's what makes them highly renowned.

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6

## Regret

I don't grumble,
It's only a regret,
A question
That bothers my mind.
I wonder,
Who should I ask:
Ask you,
Or ask that time,
Which in its passing,
Has left me
Ineffective.
The light of my eyes
Had bred a dream,
When you changed
Your intent;
My dream died away.
I never spoke to it,
But it did listen,
It read
What I had left unwritten:
Today
It has left unheard
The rhythm of my heart.

7

## Mistake

Centuries ago,
Having dropped
My wishes

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Into a dark well,
And
Tying up my emotions
Into a silken bundle;
I consigned them
To a corner
Of a dark shed of my mind,
And forgot all about them.
But that was
My biggest mistake,
Which I hid from myself
And from my delicate feelings.
Today,
Coming out
Of my mind's dark shed,
Standing on its door,
They shake me doggedly
For the mistake
Committed by me,
They torment me endlessly.
The tear-wetted soul of mine
They are ceaselessly muddying.
And with the terrible burden
Of the mistake,
That I had committed unknowingly,
They are crushing
My very being.

8

## Sunlight

The dark night

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Began to spread
Some more darkness,
The Moon too,
Drew in its shine;
And stars as well,
Winding up their glow,
Began to go
On their separate ways,
Gradually.
Bound by their names,
Cocooned in their warmth,
Sewn up in their spheres,
Disparate humans
Began to split
Into diverse parts.
Covered up
In the black ink
Of a severely splintered Time,
They came to be written
In bits and pieces;
Slowly, ever so slowly,
They got parted
From one another.
They didn't notice anyone,
They didn't know anyone;
Though the Moon
Has gathered its shine,
And stars have wound up their glow;
Even so,
There's a hope now,
That the Sun of Understanding,
Coming out of the hills,

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Will spread its light,
And eliminating the darkness
Of selfishness,
It will refurbish humanity
With its innate humanness.

9

## The Garden of Love

All my life,
I was afraid;
Like petals of flowers,
I had kept intact
Your memories
In the garden
Of our love
Which I had
Nurtured
With great fondness.
Each and every plant
Of hope,
Had I grown
With the manure
Of confidence.
Sometimes from the heat
Of the harsh sun,
And sometimes
From the cold hail
Had I saved my garden.
Disparate flowerbeds
Had I festooned
With varicoloured flowers.

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My garden,
My flowers,
My hope,
My memories,
They all now lie scattered.
My love who has gone
To the alien shores,
Has from his mind
Erased my memories.

10
Plaint

That day shall certainly dawn,
When Father
Will make Mother speak;
Mother,
Who has turned
Into a stone.
For eons together,
She sits there,
Laden under heaps of grief.
Grief -
The grief of killing my sister;
Grandma says with pride:
"She has done
The clan proud!"
Clan –
That clan,
Which is to blame
For the sin of a murder
Murder of a *kanjak*[iii],

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Who people revere.
Giving birth
To a daughter
After another daughter.
Mother was named
The '*Dhamman*[iv] Tree',
Her cot was placed near the cattle-shed,
She became mute,
With silent tears,
She spoke to Father,
Who never cared to see
What went into her mind,
He saw only to his desire;
His anticipation
Wrenched away
My shelter from me,
Who may I tell today -
"This here is my mother."
I have a plaint -
If you would listen,
Then I will make:
Before saving me,
You should have saved
My mother,
You should have
Woken up
The sleepy consciousness
Of woman,
You should have
Bolstered up women's prestige
In each and every home.
The agony that resides

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In woman's mind
Can only be curbed by empathy;
This fire won't go off
By mere slogans,
Woman herself
Would have to come forward
All else would be meaningless.

11
Heartthrob

Putting your lips
To ears mine,
What you haven't said
Ever before
Say some such thing,
Essay sometimes,
Dearest mine,
To reach my mind,
Saying something of yours,
And
Something close to my mind;
Or else;
Holding both my shoulders close,
Drawing me closer to you,
Putting your ears
Near to my heart,
Just listen for once
Those throbs,
That utter
Nothing, but your name.

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## 12
## Motherland

To what end this war?
For whom is this rage?
To what purpose this cleaving?
Why is here such discard?
I bore the brave
For valorous deeds;
Turned they are
Against me,
And spiteful they are
Of one another,
Seeds have been sown of acrimony
Between brother and brother;
If passion surges in you,
Then let it surge
Before the world,
If your bravery you want to show off,
Then show it off
On the borders,
Where sit to the left and the right,
Foes and archenemies
Having an eye on me.

## 13
## The Kinship Knot

Wide distances there were
Between you and me,
We spoke to each other
Now and then though;

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That has since stopped,
There is no longing
In us to meet,
No desire either
To let go of old memories;
By the thread only
Of memories,
Have I kept tied
The bundle of our love,
The farther you go from me,
The tighter grows the knot
Of our kinship,
As it ought.

14

## Sycophancy

Done up
In diverse hues,
Gift-packed in alluring shapes
Is the world of sycophants;
At every age,
In every place,
Can they be found;
In every gathering,
In every ceremony,
You find their sweep;
Be it home,
Be it the highway,
In every place,
They hold their sway;
Dependent they are not
On acquaintance,

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They need not
Connections either;
Their loquacity,
Their sycophancy,
That's their currency.

## 15
## Time

Sometimes in fight,
Sometimes sulking,
Sometimes in irritation;
And more often in fondness,
They grew together.
Sometimes a notebook,
Sometimes a pencil;
Sometimes an eraser,
Or a sharpener
Became causes of scuffle.
Sometimes toffees,
Sometimes biscuits,
And sometimes toys
Came to be shared bitterly,
And after the fight was over,
They sat back-to-back.
Those who fought without reason,
With scowling faces,
Who sat far from one another;
They long now to sit together,
Those who sulked,
And vowed never again to speak

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To each other,
They now think ahead
Of things to talk
When they'd get together.
Time has created
Such diverse pathways,
That the wayfarers
From the same house
Have come to stay
In their disparate havens.

16

## Woman

She -
Retreats,
Flounders,
Is restless,
Is crushed
Between the milling stones of time;
Oppressed
For centuries together,
Destitute,
Spurned
In every era,
She stands before
Every court -
Sometimes crying for justice,
Sometimes talking of rights,
Sometimes she is lost in a gamble,
Sometimes squelched
She is in bazar,

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Ahalya of the *Sat Yuga,*
Sita of the *Treta,*
Draupadi of the *Dwapar,*
Shame of the *Kali Yug;*
No one knows
For how many eons more
Will she suffer the pain.

## 17
## The Ledger

Exacting in accounts
He was,
Thus he spoke one day
During our truce:
"Did you ever think
How many gifts
Have I made to you
Till today?"
I kept quiet,
Refraining from any response;
Behind my closed eyes
Opened I
The ledger of my life.
I scanned it page by page,
Reckoning each day of life
All over again;
To make his nights
Day-bright,
How many nights
Had I to spend.
When the pen of memories

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Took an exhaustive account,
Then many of my sleepless nights outweighed
Each and every one of his days.

18

Tears

Today, once again
Have thickened,
On the sky of my mind,
The clouds of your memory;
I whimper and whimper,
My eyes rain tears again,
The flood of my tears
Have swamped my compound,
Damped are my hopes;
In silence,
Without uttering a sound,
All my joys
Have floated away.

Much else I ponder
Has gone soggy,
In the oven of my thoughts
Everything has got scorched,
Even so,
The secret remains unexposed -
My innermost tiers
Have sown
between themselves
The seed of sufferance.

19

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## My True Pal

My true pal is he,
My real love is he;
I cuddle him
Many a time to sleep,
He listens
To my cares big and small,
And shows me
Colourful dreams withal.
In his court
I go into discussion,
Without a single word spoken,
Each thought and every word
In silence does he hearken.
He nags me not
Even though time and again,
I soak his soft and delicate self
Into water boiling hot,
And punch and bang him
In my sleepless nights without a thought.
Taking away my weariness,
Calming down my restlessness,
A sentry on my senselessness,
He, my very own pillow
Has never lost his friendliness.
Whenever I put my head in his care
He gives me warmth and blessedness.

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## 20
## Love Letters

Covered in the dust
Of times bygone,
Yet filled with fondness,
Your letters
Have mouldered
With age,
Their words here and there
Have got obliterated as well,
Even so,
One thing
That is preserved
In all its pristine clarity,
In those letters bound together,
Is love
Yours mine and mine,
Duly inscribed therein.

---

[i] A North Indian festival celebrated in Mid-January – marked with a celebratory fire at night.

[ii] In Hindi, Vidhatri, a title of Goddess Saraswati in the sense of ordainer (cf Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary, p.922).

[iii] Female child – the Sanatanis consider female children sacred as manifestations of Goddess.

[iv] Leaves of this tree are used as fodder for the cattle.

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